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Patent Application

for new and useful invention entitled:

**SECUREMENT MECHANISM INCLUDING TOP LOADING TIE
DOWN CLEAT ASSEMBLY AND LOCKING MEMBER**

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SECUREMENT MECHANISM INCLUDING TOP LOADING TIE DOWN CLEAT ASSEMBLY AND LOCKING MEMBER

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/463,291 filed April 16, 2003, the entire contents of which are herein incorporated by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention is directed to an innovative tie down cleat assembly. The assembly is loaded into a rail or any vehicle surface and clamped into position.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Tie down cleats are commonly used with rails having channels defined by side walls and a bottom surface disposed between the side walls. The top of each side wall typically has an inwardly extending leg disposed above the bottom surface. The tie down cleat is disposed along a rail with a portion of the tie down cleat including a lock plate being received within the channel, and movement selectively constrained through interaction of the cleat with at least a subset of the side walls, bottom surface, and legs.

[0004] Typically, a tie down cleat is associated with a rail using one of two approaches. One approach is to remove an end cap and then insert the portion of the cleat including the lock plate into the end of the rail. A problem with this approach is that a user has to physically remove a component to allow for installation of the cleat. The end cap may be lost, become damaged, or be difficult to reinstall. Moreover, the end of the rail must be accessible, typically reducing the overall length of rail available for use.

[0005] Another well known approach is to have a notch added at discrete points along the rail, wherein the portion of the cleat including the lock plate is inserted into the notch and then the tie down cleat slid away from the notch before the tie down

cleat is locked into position at a fixed point away from the notch. The amount of usable rail length available to a consumer is reduced by adding a notch to the rail channel. Further, under some circumstances, if the tie down cleat becomes unsecured or creeps along the rail, it can suddenly escape from a notch.

[0006] Accordingly, an improved tie down cleat assembly allowing installation without removing a component or an end cap is desired. It would further be highly desirable to provide such a mechanism that may be secured anywhere along a vehicle surface adapted to receive the assembly.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] The present invention provides a solution to known problems in the prior art by providing an innovative securement mechanism comprising a tie down cleat assembly and a locking member such as a rail. The rail has a continuously extending channel along its longitudinal length, the channel defined by a web disposed between opposing side rails and legs extending into the channel from free ends of each side rail. In one embodiment of the invention, the rail has a somewhat C-shaped cross-section. An end cap may be permanently secured to the rail and notches are not required. The tie down assembly is top loaded into the rail and secured into position. The tie down assembly may also be secured anywhere along a vehicle surface adapted to receive the assembly.

[0008] In a preferred aspect, the assembly includes a housing that accommodates one handed gripping and turning by a user while providing the ability to attach items to the assembly. A pin is disposed through the housing. The assembly further includes a lock plate adjacent to a free end of the pin. The lock plate has a first dimension suitable for insertion into the channel of the locking member and a second dimension capable of gripping the underside of the legs in a locked and secured position. Finally, the assembly preferably includes an actuating member capable of moving the pin and lock plate up and down between secured and unsecured orientations with respect to the rail.

[0009] In a more preferred embodiment of the invention, the pin and actuating member threadingly engage one another such that rotation of the actuating member

moves the pin and attached locking plate up and down. To prevent the pin from rotating at the same time the actuating member is rotated, it typically includes at least a partial non-circular cross-section. The mating portion of the housing includes a non-circular feature that complements the non-circular cross-section of the pin to the extent that rotation of the pin within the housing is minimized as the actuating member is rotated.

[0010] During operation, the user can install the tie down assembly by loading the lock plate into the rail by aligning the first dimension with the space between the rail legs and then rotating the lock plate until the second dimension is capable of engaging the underside of the rail legs. In a preferred embodiment, the entire housing is rotated approximately ninety degrees, simultaneously rotating the lock plate at the same time. Thus, the tie down assembly typically rotates as one component. The actuating member is then activated to move the pin and lock plate into a secured orientation such as by clamping.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] The features and inventive aspects of the present invention will become more apparent upon reading the following detailed description, claims, and drawings, of which the following is a brief description:

[0012] FIG. 1 is a perspective view according to one embodiment of a tie down cleat assembly shown in a secured orientation on a mating rail.

[0013] FIGS. 2A – 2D show the process for securing the tie down cleat assembly in FIG. 1 to a mating rail with the assembly approaching the rail in FIG 2A, being inserted into the rail in FIG 2B, starting to rotate toward a final orientation in FIG. 2C, and shown in its final aligned orientation with the rail in FIG. 2D.

[0014] FIG. 3 is an exploded perspective view of FIG. 1 showing the various elements of one embodiment of the tie down cleat assembly and corresponding rail.

[0015] FIG. 4 is an exploded perspective view of a lock plate subassembly of the tie down cleat assembly in accordance with the embodiment of FIG. 1.

[0016] FIG. 5 is a table showing the exemplary material properties of select elements of the tie down cleat assembly of FIG. 1.

[0017] FIG. 6 is a cross-sectional view of the tie down cleat assembly of FIG. 1 in a final secured orientation with respect to the corresponding rail.

[0018] FIG. 7 is a perspective view of the tie down cleat assembly shown in FIG. 1 with a cut away to the interior of the assembly.

[0019] FIG. 8 is a perspective view of the tie down cleat assembly according to an alternative embodiment of the invention showing a one-piece tie down and a ratcheting cap.

[0020] FIG. 9 is a side view of the alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 8 in a secured position.

[0021] FIG. 10 is a side view of the alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 8 showing a biasing member pushing an actuating member up in to an unsecured position.

[0022] FIG. 11 is a top view of the alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 9.

[0023] FIG. 12 is a bottom view of the alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 9.

[0024] FIG. 13 is a front view of the alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 9.

[0025] FIG. 14 is a cross-sectional view of the alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 8 along the longitudinal length of a rail. The alternative embodiment is shown in a final secured orientation.

[0026] FIG. 15 is a cross-sectional view of the alternative embodiment shown in FIG. 8 along the longitudinal length of a rail. The alternative embodiment is shown perpendicular to the rail in an unlocked position.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0027] Referring now to the drawings, preferred illustrative embodiments of the present invention are shown in detail. Although the drawings represent embodiments of the present invention, the drawings are not necessarily to scale and certain features may be exaggerated to better illustrate and explain the present invention. Further, the embodiments set forth herein are not intended to be exhaustive or otherwise limit or restrict the invention to the precise forms and configurations shown in the drawings and disclosed in the following detailed description.

[0028] The present invention is directed to an innovative securement mechanism including a tie down cleat assembly 10 and mating component in the form of a locking member or rail 12, as shown in a first embodiment of FIGs. 1 through 7.

[0029] Rail 12 has a continuously extending channel 14 along its longitudinal length. The channel 14 of the rail 12 is defined by a web or bottom surface 50 disposed between opposing side rails 52, legs 54 extending into the channel from a free end of each side rail (as best shown in FIG. 6). An end cap (not shown) may be permanently secured to the rail 12 that may or may not contain notches. When there are no notches, legs 54 are uninterrupted along the longitudinal length of rail 12.

[0030] Tie down cleat assembly 10 is loaded to a top surface 16 of the rail 12 and secured into position. While a rail is shown, locking member 12 may also be a corresponding hole, passage, or pocket anywhere on a vehicle surface (not shown).

[0031] The innovative tie down cleat assembly 10 includes a housing 17 comprising a tie down 18 and a base plate 20 that rides along the top surface 16 of the rail 12 or vehicle surface (not shown). As best shown in FIG. 3, the tie down 18 is secured to the base plate 20 by way of typical fasteners such as bolts 22, washers 23, and nuts 24. In FIG. 7 assembly 10 is in a locked position.

[0032] The bolts 22 are placed through a counter bore 25 in tie down 18 and then through a corresponding counter bore hole 26 of the base plate 20. The head of each bolt engages a bottom surface of one of counter bore 25 and 26 and the washer and nut of the engage the bottom surface of the other counter bore.

[0033] In turn, the sub-assembly of the tie down 18 and base plate 20 is secured to the rail 12 using a lock plate subassembly 28 as shown in FIG. 4. Lock plate subassembly 28 includes a lock plate 30, a pin 32, a retainer 34, a thrust washer 36 with downwardly extending tabs 37, a nut and washer combination 38, and an actuating member 40. The lock plate 30 is rigidly secured to the first free end 39 of the pin 32. Thus, as the pin 32 is rotated, the lock plate 30 is rotated to the same angular extent. Thus, the lock plate 30 does not spin independently of the pin 32. In an alternative embodiment, lock plate 30 and pin 32 may be a single component.

[0034] The lock plate 30 includes a first dimension 41 and a second dimension 42. The second dimension 42 is greater than the first dimension 41. In the indicated embodiment, lock plate 30 is generally rectangular with the first dimension being the

short edge and the second dimension being the long edge. Lock plate 30 also has two optional extending ears 43 to help facilitate the selective gripping of legs 54 of rail 12 when the assembly 10 is in a final secured orientation as discussed below.

[0035] Pin 32 includes a threaded second end 46 and a non-circular cross-section 43 disposed along a portion of the pin between first end 39 and second end 46. While a "square" cross section is shown, generally any non-circular shape will be acceptable.

[0036] As best shown in FIGs. 6 and 7, lock plate subassembly is shown inserted through a mating aperture 47 of base plate 20. Aperture 47 is shown tapered in cross-section so that up and down movement of pin 32 is unimpeded even if the pin is offset from illustrated axis A-A. Aperture 47 includes a non-circular periphery along at least a portion of its longitudinal extent that mates with the corresponding surface 47 pin 32 in an interference fit upon pin rotation such that while the pin 32 may move up and down within the aperture 47, at most minimal rotation is permitted between pin 32 and base plate 20. As a result, as the pin 32 is rotated, the base plate 20 and tie down 18 are rotated to substantially the same angular extent. Moreover, while the lock plate 30 is shown secured to the pin 32 using typical welding or related securing approaches, it could instead also include a corresponding non-circular aperture (not shown) to minimize rotation of the lock plate 30 with respect to the pin 32.

[0037] Aperture 47 also includes a counter bore 68 with a bottom surface 69, counter bore 68 spaced adjacent to an upper end 66 of the base plate. A retainer 34 is secured to pin 32 at a radially inwardly extending notch 44 and extends radially outward from the outer periphery of pin 32. Retainer 34 selectively contacts bottom surface 69 of counter bore 68 to prevent pin 32 from escaping through aperture 47. On the other hand, the longitudinal extent of counter bore 68 is such that retainer 34 does not prohibit the securing of the assembly 10. As illustrated in FIG. 6, even when assembly 10 is in a secured orientation, retainer 34 has not escaped from counter bore 68. Thus, as the pin 32 moves up and down within the tie down cleat assembly 10 along axis A-A, the retainer 34 moves with the pin 32. The radial extent of counter bore 68 is greater than that of the aperture 47 and it may also include a complementary non-circular cross-section.

[0038] Finally, the uppermost portion of base plate 20 includes a counter bore 45 disposed about the periphery of aperture 47 and above counter bore 68. A thrust washer 36 is disposed in counter bore 45. A key purpose of the thrust washer 36 is to prohibit damage to the base plate 20 such as galling as the nut and washer combination 38 is rotated with respect to the pin 32, as discussed below.

[0039] When the tie down cleat assembly 10 is in a non-secured orientation the thrust washer 36 has a tendency to move up and down along axis A-A and to twist about the longitudinally extending axis of the base plate aperture 47. Thus, in a preferred embodiment of the invention and as shown in FIG. 4, thrust washer 36 has a generally planer first surface and two generally perpendicular downwardly extending ears 37, received in corresponding pockets 48 extending into the upper surface of the base plate 20 adjacent to, but spaced away from counter bore 45, as shown best in FIG. 3. The two outwardly extending tabs 37 of thrust washer 36 that mate with the base plate 20 at pockets 48 generally keep thrust washer 36 in place, prevent accidental rotation, but still permit movement of pin 32 along axis A-A. Preferably, the extent of the ears 37 with respect to axis A-A is such that they are greater than the longitudinal travel of the pin 32 between the secured and unsecured orientations of the tie down cleat assembly 10. The counter bore 45 itself may also be shaped to prevent accidental rotation of the thrust washer 36.

[0040] The nut and washer combination 38 is secured to actuating member 40 and operationally threaded to pin 32, allowing pin 32 to move up and down along axis A-A when the actuating member is rotated rather than requiring a tool such as a wrench. Thus, actuating member 40 is rigidly secured to the nut and washer combination 38 such that the rotation of the actuating member results in a corresponding rotation of the nut and washer combination. It is contemplated that the actuating member 40 may be a thumbwheel, a nut, a ratcheting cap, a lever, or any component capable of accomplishing a function of moving the pin 32 up and down along axis A-A. While a threading arrangement is shown, other approaches may be used to secure lock plate subassembly 28.

[0041] Despite the clamping mechanism used, as shown in FIG. 6, the dimensions of the lock plate 30 are very important. The second dimension 42 of lock plate 30 permits the lock plate 30 to be freely inserted into the channel 14 of the rail 12 from

the top surface 16 without interference from a bottom surface 50, a side wall 52 or legs 54. When the lock plate 30 is rotated about axis A-A after insertion into channel 14, the extending ears 43 of lock plate 30, corresponding to the ends of first dimension 41, engage the legs 54 of the rail 12. FIG. 6 shows the lock plate 30 in an engaged and locked position where the extending ears 43 of lock plate 30 grip the legs 54 of rail 12. Typically, lock plate 30 is rotated 90 degrees. Dimension 41 is greater than the space between legs 54, as represented by dimension 58 while dimension 42 is less than dimension 58. When lock plate 30 is rectangular, the diagonal dimension of the lock plate defined by the hypotenuse of the first edge and the second edge must be less than the distance between side walls 52 so that the assembly 10 may be freely rotated three hundred and sixty degrees (360°).

[0042] Because of the relationship between pin 32 and aperture 47 of the lock plate, and the relationship of the lock plate 20 with tie down 18, rotation of one member preferably results in rotation of the entire tie down assembly as a single component. As a result, when lock plate 20 is rotated into engagement with legs 54, tie down 18 should be aligned with rail 18 in the desired orientation, which is typically parallel with the rail as shown in FIG. 1

[0043] FIG. 2A – 2D show the process of securing the tie down cleat assembly 10 to the rail 12. FIG. 2A shows the assembly 10 approaching the rail 12 with the longest dimension of the tie down offset from the longitudinal extent of the rail. Lock plate 30 is shown with dimension 42 in alignment with channel 14 so that it may be inserted between legs 54 of the rail. In FIG. 2B the lock plate 30 is inserted into channel 14 of rail 12. In FIG. 2C, assembly 10 is being rotated until in FIG. 2D the longest dimension of the tie down 18 is aligned with the longitudinal extent of rail 12. At the same time, dimension 42 of lock plate 20 is now positioned beneath legs 54 of rail 12. Rotation of actuating member 40 will move pin 32 up and result in the engagement of ears 43 with legs 54 and the corresponding engagement of lock plate 20 with top surface 16 of rail 12. To release assembly 10, the process is simply reversed.

[0044] To further enhance the clamping of the tie down cleat assembly 10 to the rail 12, select mating surfaces of the rail or base plate may include surface interruptions (not shown) to increase the frictional engagement. In the alternative, the

upper surface of the lock plate 30 may include surface interruptions (not shown) that engage the underside of the rail ears 54.

[0045] The tie down cleat assembly 10 is typically intended for use in vehicle application for either an article carrier (not shown) or a bed rail system (not shown). The tie down cleat assembly 10 would load through the top surface 16 of the rail 12 or channel 14 rather than through a loading notch (not shown) or end of the rail 12. This is done by keeping the relative movement of the lock plate 30 to the tie down cleat assembly 10 fixed.

[0046] The top down loading allows a user to install the tie down cleat assembly 10 anywhere along the length of the channel 14 without removing any existing components (not shown) and it gives the user the full length of rail 12 as usable channel 14.

[0047] Alternatively, if rail 12 does include notches within a portion of legs 54, the notch is shaped to facilitate retention of lock plate 30 in the secured orientation so that longitudinal movement of the assembly 10 is minimized. An edge of second dimension 41 would engage a corresponding notch edge formed by a portion of the leg. In one embodiment, the notch would consist of selective removal of the portion of a leg 54 extending downwardly toward a bottom surface 50 of rail 12 while still providing appropriate clamping surface.

[0048] FIG. 5 shows a table of the selective elements for the assembly 10 and various material properties of the elements used in one exemplary assembly. The tie down 18 is shown to be out of aluminum; however, steel and plastic are also contemplated. The actuating member 40 is shown to be out of aluminum and in the form of a thumb wheel; however, steel and plastic are also contemplated. In place of a thumb wheel, a ratcheting cap, a lever, or any component capable of accomplishing a function of moving the pin 32 up and down along axis A-A is also acceptable. The base plate 20 is shown to be aluminum; however, steel and plastic are also contemplated. The nut in the nut and washer combination 38 is shown to be steel and the washer is shown to be spring steel; however, other materials such as aluminum and plastic may also be appropriate in some cases. The thrust washer 36, pin 32, lock plate 30, bolt 22, washer 24, and nut 26 are shown to be stainless steel; however,

steel, aluminum, and plastic could be used. The retainer is contemplated to be aluminum, steel, or plastic.

[0049] An alternative embodiment of the invention, an assembly 10' is shown in FIGS. 8 – 15. In general, elements similar in nature to those of the first embodiment share the same element number and work in a similar manner.

[0050] Assembly 10' includes a one-piece housing 80 that integrates both a tie down 18' and a base plate 20'. FIG. 14 shows assembly 10' in a secured orientation, attached to a vehicle surface 82 by way of a rail 12'. Rail 12' is similar in design to rail 12, with legs 54' somewhat thickened as they turn inward toward bottom surface or web 50'

[0051] Actuating member 40' is illustrated as a ratcheting cap in mechanical communication with a pin 32' and a lock plate 30'. As member 40' is rotated, pin 32' moves up or down, depending on the direction of rotation of the actuating member 40', and they are threadingly engaged with one another. Actuating member 40' is hollow, having an upper portion 84 and a lower portion 86. Lower portion 86 has an upper surface 88 and an opening 90. Opening 90 threadingly engages pin 32' such that as actuating member 40' is rotated, pin 32' moves up and down.

[0052] The pin 32' includes a radially inwardly extending notch 44' receiving a radially outwardly extending retainer 34'. Retainer 34' prevents pin 32' from passing through opening 90 and selectively engages surface 88. It limits the longitudinal movement of pin 32' downward. However, pin 32' is also limited in longitudinal movement upward. End 46' can selectively hit the underside of upper portion 84. Alternatively, as shown, aperture 47' and pin 32' can be shaped so that upward movement of pin 32 is prevented when a thickened region 104 of pin 32' bottoms out in a counter bore 106 of aperture 47'. The mating surfaces are angled to provide additional area of contact and minimize accidental damage if there is over torquing of the pin 32' with respect to the base plate 20'.

[0053] Once again, lock plate 30' has a first dimension 41 and a second dimension 42, but unlike the first embodiment, no ears 43.

[0054] As shown in FIGS. 10 and 14, a biasing member in the form of a spring 92 biases actuating member 40' away from base plate 20' and lock plate 30' toward the base plate 20'. It is disposed between a lower surface 94 of the actuating member 40'

and an upper surface 66' of base plate 20'. One goal is to have lock plate 30' closely adjacent to the underside of base plate 20' to facilitate the insertion of the assembly 10' into a rail 12'. Sometimes, insertion can be complicated if lock plate 30' extends longitudinally too far away from the rest of the assembly 10'.

[0055] FIG. 9 shows assembly 10' with the actuating member 40' pushed downward against the biasing force of the spring 92. Spring 92 is also compressed when assembly 10' is in a secured orientation as shown in FIG 14.

[0056] The lowermost surface 96 of base plate 20' includes a plurality of protrusions 98 extending away from the base plate 20'. As shown in FIG. 12, the protrusions 98 have a width 100 less than dimension 58 of the channel 14'. They help to prevent accidental rotation of the assembly 10' when it is in its secured orientation by being received within channel 14' of the rail 12' and trapped between legs 54'.

[0057] FIG. 11, FIG. 12, and FIG. 13 show the top, bottom and side view respectively of the housing 18' in a secured or closed orientation. In FIG. 15, the assembly 10' is shown in an unlocked position and unsecured position. To load the assembly 10' into the rail 12', the actuating member 40' must be manually pushed downward against the force of the biasing member 92 so that the second dimension 42 of the lock plate 30' is inserted into the channel 14' of the rail 12' once the assembly 10' is properly aligned with channel 14'. The lock plate 30' must clear the legs 54' and take into account the presence of the protrusions 98 generally perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the rail 12'. Then the entire assembly 10' is rotated approximately ninety degrees (90°) so that the first dimension 41 of the lock plate 30' may engage or otherwise interlock with the rail 12' at the legs 54' as shown in FIG 14. Protrusions 98 extend into channel 14'. At least one benefit of using the biasing member 92 in this manner is that the biasing member 92 forces the lock plate 30 against the legs 54' of the rail 12' holding the assembly 10' in place before the securing operation is executed. Then, actuating member 40' is rotated, clamping legs 54' of rail 12' between the base plate 20' and the lock plate 30' by way of longitudinal movement of pin 32'. To release assembly 10', the process is reversed.

[0058] The present invention has been particularly shown and described with reference to the foregoing embodiments, which are merely illustrative of the best modes for carrying out the invention. It should be understood by those skilled in the

art that various alternatives to the embodiments of the invention described herein may be employed in practicing the invention without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention as defined in the following claims. It is intended that the following claims define the scope of the invention and that the method and apparatus within the scope of these claims and their equivalents be covered thereby. This description of the invention should be understood to include all novel and non-obvious combinations of elements described herein, and claims may be presented in this or a later application to any novel and non-obvious combination of these elements. Moreover, the foregoing embodiments are illustrative, and no single feature or element is essential to all possible combinations that may be claimed in this or a later application.